

# Leopard Gecko: Basic Care and Feeding

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## HABITAT AND CHARACTERISTICS

The leopard gecko, *Eublepharis macularius*, is a nocturnal lizard found in dry, rocky habitats of Pakistan and northwest India. Captive hatched and raised adults are generally calm and easily handled. Juveniles may be skittish at first but with gentle handling two to three times per week they will usually calm down within a few months. It is important not to try to force them to accept handling and not to grab or squeeze the tail, which can be pulled off. The tail will regrow but it will not look the same. Leopard geckos can live in excess of 20 years and reach an average adult size of seven to eight and a half inches in length (17.8 to 21.6 cm).

## CAPTIVE ENVIRONMENT

A 10 gallon aquarium will house up to three leopard geckos, although the use of a larger aquarium is encouraged. Three to four geckos can be kept in a 20 gallon aquarium. Bedding that is easily ingested such as sand, corncob, bark, shavings and other small substrates should be avoided as they can cause stomach or intestinal impaction which is quite serious and possibly fatal. Newspaper, indoor-outdoor carpeting or plastic green grass matting is recommended. It is best to purchase several pieces to fit your enclosure so that it can be replaced at least weekly and the soiled pieces can be cleaned with dilute bleach water (1 part bleach:30 parts water) and allowed to air dry. Although these lizards are not able to climb glass, a secure lid should be provided to keep other things out (i.e. cats, falling objects, etc.) and to keep insect prey from escaping.

It is important to create a temperature gradient from one side of the enclosure to the other of approximately 21°C (70°F) on the cool side and 30°C (85°F) on the warm side. This is accomplished by putting your light and heat sources on one side. It is recommended not to use a hot rock as localized hot spots may occur. Use a thermometer that can be moved to check the temperature in different places in the enclosure. Please remember that in a captive microenvironment such as this, any change in heat/light sources or changes in room temperature can affect the temperature of the lizard so monitor temperatures carefully when any changes are made. Leopard geckos have been successfully raised without the use of ultraviolet lights. Provide a hide box and allow for a day/night cycle by providing a night heat source that supplies heat without much light such as a black or red bulb, a ceramic heating element or undertank heater. The temperature at night can drop down to the mid 20°C (70°F). Access to a shallow water dish is necessary, clean it with hot soapy water at least weekly or whenever soiled. The water should be changed on a daily basis.

In enclosures where multiple leopard geckos are housed do not put more than one male per cage as adult males are territorial and will fight with each other. Similar sized females can be kept in groups without problems. In their natural environment, geckos are found under rocks in cool damp burrows. The higher humidity in the burrows helps them to shed. The skin of a gecko will become pale with a white sheen prior to shedding. At this time they should be misted lightly or provided with damp vermiculite, sphagnum moss or paper towels in their hidebox to aid in the shedding process. The moisture will help to prevent unshed skin on the toes which can form constricting bands as the gecko gets bigger. It is

common for leopard geckos to eat their shed skin and it is not harmful for them to do so.

## FEEDING

Crickets, mealworms, superworms and waxworms are all acceptable food items. Adults can also be fed pinkie mice once or twice per month but this is not essential. Juveniles and females used for breeding should be fed insects every other day. Young geckos in groups will bite each other each others tails and digits if not fed often enough. Adult leopard geckos can be fed at least twice per week. Provide appropriate sized insects for the size of your gecko, feeding prey items that are too large can cause impaction. Wild caught insects such as moths and grasshoppers can be fed as long as there is no known exposure to pesticides (do not feed dead or dying insects).

It is important to make sure that the insect prey items you use have been "gut loaded" or fed a diet with an 8% or greater calcium content for at least 48 hours prior to feeding to your geckos. A commercial cricket ration is available from Ziegler Brothers Inc. (PO Box 95, Gardens, PA) that will provide the calcium needed to gutload crickets or one can be made by mixing 80% nutritionally complete chick mash (available in any feed store) with 20% powder calcium carbonate by weight. Immediately prior to feeding dust the food items with a calcium carbonate powder. Also, not more than once per week, the prey items should be dusted with a multi-vitamin containing vitamin D3.

## PREVENTATIVE HEALTHCARE AND DISEASES

It is recommended that you research as much as you can about the specific needs of leopard geckos before you obtain one. During the first week after acquiring the lizard a veterinarian skilled in reptile care should do a post purchase health exam. The exam should check for parasites (internal and external), overall health, and to establish proper diet and environmental conditions early on. The following list of problems for which a reptile veterinarian should be consulted:

- Not eating, no stool production (Unless the tail is plump and rounded and your pet is active and alert. Some geckos will fast on their own for a few weeks at a time.)
- Difficulty shedding
- Drooling, salivation or malformation of the lower jaw
- Open mouthed breathing or difficulty breathing
- Inability to use legs
- Abdominal swelling, or swelling of any of the limbs
- The presence of pink tissue protruding from the vent
- Diarrhea or straining to urinate or pass stool
- Digits that are smaller (atrophied) or discolored
- Depressed or inactive behavior
- Darkened appearance and/or thin tail
- Discharge from eyes, nose, or mouth
- If a lost tail does not start to regenerate within a week or discharge is noted.

An educational handout concerning reptiles and Salmonella is available through the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians. Please ask your veterinarian for a copy.